

Summary Report: Parent Focus Groups Children's Services Regulation Review

November 2008



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1 Introduction

In September 2008, the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) began a major review of the Children's Services Regulation 2004. The review is intended to introduce important reforms to the way in which children's services are regulated in NSW. The regulatory review process is comprehensive and it is anticipated that a re-made Regulation will take effect by mid-2010.

As part of the review process, DoCS contracted RPR Consulting to conduct:

- 16 service provider forums across NSW. Each forum provided participants with an opportunity to gain an understanding of the broad options being considered as part of the review and to discuss their views in small groups as well as in plenary sessions.
- 6 parent focus groups covering different service types were held in rural and urban areas. Parents were provided with a short information sheet and discussed key issues for the review including: staff qualifications, staff ratios, breaches, compliance and the balance between affordability and quality.
- Two online surveys: one longer survey aimed at service providers and one shorter survey aimed at parents. Both surveys were informed by responses at the forums and the parent focus groups and operated between 24 November and 12 December.

These four sources of information have been designed to both provide information to service providers and parents about the review, as well as gain initial responses that will help to shape the development of a draft regulation in 2009.

This report provides a summary of issues raised by parents that attended the parent focus groups. Separate reports are being prepared on the other forms of consultation undertaken for the review.

1.1 About the focus groups

Six parent focus groups were conducted across NSW. The focus groups attempted to gain a cross section of views from parents from different backgrounds, with children of differing ages, in a range of locations and service types.

The majority of parents attending used multiple care arrangements, so were often able to comment on other service types in addition to the service type they had been recruited from. Two groups specifically targeted services with high numbers of families from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, while one group targeted a service with a high proportion of Aboriginal families.

Parents were recruited through service providers including private and not-for-profit preschools and long day care services as well as family day care. Service providers were given a small fee to recruit parents, organise the venue, catering and child care if needed.

Preschool and long day care service providers¹ were asked to contact other similar service types in their area to recruit a range of parents. One focus group (Liverpool) ended up attracting parents from a range of services in the area, while the Dubbo group attracted parents from a centre and a few from a family day care service.

Details of these are outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus group location by service type and focus

Location	Service type	Specific focus	Number of participants
Central Sydney, Marrickville	Family day care	CALD	9
New England, Armidale	Family day care		7
Western NSW, Dubbo	Private LDC		10
Metro South West Sydney, Liverpool	Community LDC	CALD	7
Inner City Sydney, Redfern	Community preschool	Aboriginal	6
Western Sydney, Blacktown	Private preschool		11
Total			50

Format of the focus groups

Each group went for 1.5 hours and was conducted by an experienced facilitator, assisted by a colleague who recorded the responses of the parents.

The focus group format included:

- A short introduction by the facilitator
- Self-introduction by each participant (included information on their children, their use of children's services in the past and currently and the most important things they expected of a service)
- A short discussion in pairs to identify their biggest concerns when using a children's service. Each idea was recorded in the pairs on separate pieces of paper. These ideas were collected by the facilitator, read out and grouped into themes by the facilitator and the group.
- Specific discussion focusing on aspects of the review, following a short explanation by the facilitator of the current situation and any options for change (enhancing staff qualifications; introduction of reduced child:staff ratios for under twos, particularly in relation to family day care; enforcement of compliance; how to balance likely increases in cost with improvements to quality).

¹ Family day care schemes operate within larger catchment areas, so it was unlikely to have another scheme in the same location.

Limitations on the use of focus group information

Focus groups are a useful qualitative method for gaining an insight into how issues are interpreted and assessed by participants. Focus groups are not a representative sample of a particular population; they simply report the views of individuals that attended them.

This report outlines parent's views from a range of service types, locations and backgrounds. It can assist those responsible for the regulation review by providing more in-depth understanding of how parent's view issues related to quality and children's services. The on-line survey will provide additional quantitative information to help supplement this report.

2 Overall responses around use of children's services

Not surprisingly, when parents were asked to identify the most important thing they valued in using a children's service and then to discuss their concerns, there was considerable overlap between the two – concerns being a mirror image of what was important.

Nonetheless there was a slightly different emphasis between the two: parents tended to identify more issues about the quality of carer's interactions and the culture of the service in promoting children's well being as of most importance; safety issues were more likely to be identified as a concern.

2.1 What parents value in children's services

Quality of carers

The most consistent thing that was valued and regarded as most important by the overwhelming majority of parents was the quality of the carers in their interaction with children. Two related concepts were expressed on this issue:

- Carers have personal qualities that demonstrated warmth, genuine enjoyment of children, a capacity to extend a 'family' type approach. This was particularly the case for parents of younger aged children.
- Carers that have skills to assist children to learn and progress developmentally.

Examples of these concepts include:

“the quality of care – who the carers are and what they do” (Marrickville FDC)

“carers look after all children like they would their own children” (Armidale FDC)

“providing a loving, caring environment with an education focus as children move toward school” (Liverpool LDC)

“staff are providing education not just care” (Dubbo LDC).

The other aspect identified in relation to the quality of carers was by Aboriginal parents and those from CALD backgrounds. These parents emphasised the importance of continuity in culture and language between home and the children's service, with carers being critical in fostering cultural respect, skills and pride. Aboriginal parents expressed this as 'trustworthiness' of the service and staff, while CALD parents talked about having staff that spoke the same language and helped to reinforce cultural approaches to caring (“most important aspect is that the carer speaks my first language (Portuguese) to my child”).

Home like environments

For parents using family day care (FDC), a key thing they valued was the sense of a family environment, often expressed as a “cosy home-like environment”. Many mentioned that carers include their children within their own families, while some also mentioned that the carer had become part of their own extended networks. This was important as it implies that “your children are cared about”. This was often linked to the smaller group size of FDC as well as the location of the service within a home.

This was also mentioned by a few parents using a long day care service, “carers look after all children like they would their own children” and “my child feels a sense of belonging when at day care” and it’s a “close knit group – like a community”.

Continuity between home and childcare

Parents in all service types expressed the need for continuity between what was happening at home and in the childcare service, and the importance of good communication between staff and parents.

“positive interaction between carers and children where carers are looking after individual children’s needs and the environment replicates that found at home, carers also need to have an understanding of how parents think and feel about child care and their children”

“Learning similar values as at home, knowing that your values are respected”.

Developmental stimulation and learning

Most parents identified the importance of fostering children’s development and learning as of key importance to them. While those in FDC tended to place greater emphasis on ‘caring’, they also identified learning and development as important qualities within the service, particularly as children grew older.

Developmental skills identified included behaviour and emotional skills, gross motor skills, language and cognitive skills, early literacy and numeracy leading to transition to school.

“teaching kids good behaviour”

“providing stepping stones for learning – for future success at school”

“helping kids to learn good communication skills”

“teaching kids how to learn and prepare them for school”

“developmental stages are monitored and discussed with parents”

“educational, social and developmental aspects of care”.

Children’s enjoyment and happiness

Many parents judged the quality of the service on how happy their children are at being left and showing that they have fun and are learning (“when I drop my child off he doesn’t cry and when I pick him up he’s happy”, “keeping kids happy and entertained”, “children being comfortable”). How their children coped with the service was also a key concern, as described below.

Safety of care

Finally, the other issue mentioned by most parents was ‘safety’. This issue was explored in greater detail in later sections of the focus groups, but was mentioned more generally as important (“safe, clean environment”, “safety and interaction”, “keeping kids safe”).

Stability of care

A few parents talked about the importance of having stability of carers that children could learn to bond with over time: “stability of carer” and having “constant staff”. This issue was more likely to be raised as a concern as indicated below.

2.2 Main concerns identified

Similar issues were identified across the groups. The two FDC groups described some of the concerns and/or had additional concerns that related to the specific differences in how care is provided in a carer’s home. The FDC issues are outlined first.

Family day care concerns

Parents were very aware of the constraints placed upon care within the FDC model: having a single carer working in relative isolation decreases flexibility and also increases risks in relation to carer illness or stress. Other concerns raised in relation to FDC included:

- other adults being in the carer’s home
- driving skills of carers
- not having enough information about how well individual carers comply with health and safety requirements, cleanliness issues in the home
- stimulation and preparation for school.

Affordability

Parents across the focus groups identified affordability of care as an ongoing issue. This was particularly true of parents with more than one child and who used multiple service types. However, not all parents within the groups raised the issue of affordability, indicating that considerable variation exists in the extent to which parent’s have capacity to absorb the cost of care.

Consistency and capacity of staff

Two different concepts were articulated in relation to consistency. The first related to staff turnover and the need to have continuity of relationships for children and families using the service. The second concept related to internal consistency between staff in working with children: having staff provide care in a consistent way by giving the same messages to children, following stable routines etc.

Parents also raised concerns in relation to the capacities of staff in caring for children. These concerns included the ‘personal fit’ of the staff member in relation to caring and education of children, their qualifications and how equipped they were to deal with emergencies.

Relationships and conflict resolution

Concerns grouped under this area were extensive. Parents saw these issues as key to 'quality of care'. Parents were concerned about all interactions – between children, between staff and children, between staff and parents. In four of the groups (not in FDC groups) parents raised issues about 'bullying' and 'exclusion' of children and the capacity of staff to notice these interactions and appropriately intervene. A few parents raised this issue in relation to a perceived bias against some children by staff. Some CALD and Aboriginal parents also emphasised the need for relationships that were culturally respectful and inclusive.

In relation to parent and staff interaction, parents were concerned about how information was relayed, the extent to which feedback about their children is provided and whether the service gives help and information on parenting when asked for it.

Learning and development

Parents in all groups were concerned about whether children were being stimulated enough, their individual learning needs met and whether there was sufficient assistance being given to gain cognitive skills. Parents in most of the groups understood the importance of play in learning. Some parents also raised the issue of children being 'cotton balled' and not able to have fun and adventure, due to the need to minimise risks to safety.

Also identified under learning and development were issues relating to children's behaviour, and how discipline is dealt with. Parents were concerned if staff diverted children without addressing the difficult behaviour or where staff failed to provide feedback on issues to parents and how they were approaching them. A few parents also raised issues about whether children were being provided with emotional learning, helping them to give a name to the feelings they were experiencing and how to deal with these emotions.

Safety

A wide range of issues were covered under the theme of safety:

- safe environments, including equipment and access issues
- supervision by staff to ensure safety of children
- hygiene and cleanliness, such as spread of infection or nappy changing practices
- security of children in terms of control of visitors or parents signing out procedures, and equipping children through teaching them about self-protection.

3 Specific responses in relation to review options

Overall, few parents were aware of the current regulation system for children's services. In one focus group, parents associated DoCS with child protection rather than having a broader role in regulation of children's services.

Most parents came to the focus groups without having read the background information sheet (it was unclear whether this was because they had not been given a copy). In one focus group parents had been given a copy of the full discussion paper as well as the information sheet.

The lack of background information meant that the facilitator provided parents in each group with a short overview of some of the current regulations for children's services as well as the specific options being considered in the review. Overall, most parents were not aware of the lack of qualifications requirements for staff and the staff : child ratios currently operating.

The focus groups explored three general questions in each group:

- what weight should the review place on enhancing staff: child ratios for under two year olds when considering the issues of quality and affordability?
- what weight should the review place on enhancing staff qualifications?
- what approaches should the review consider in strengthening compliance and enforcement of the regulations?

Each question allowed a range of other issues to be explored that related to parent's perceptions of quality and how the issues of any rises in costs might impact on parents.

Overall, parents were enthusiastic about the opportunity to be consulted. All groups wanted to stay on talking beyond the finishing time and parents indicated how much they appreciated learning about the regulations and contributing to the review.

3.1 Differences associated with location and service types

Service types

Overall, there were few differences between LDC and preschool parent groups, with most differences emerged between centre based care groups and the two FDC groups. As the options and impacts for FDC are different from centre-based services, responses from these two groups are discussed separately in relation to ratios and qualifications.

Rural and urban differences

The main differences between parent groups in rural and urban areas related to:

- difficulties in attracting and training staff in rural areas
- less choice of services for parents in rural areas.

These differences tended to play out when considering the issue of qualifications, as parents were concerned about either attracting qualified staff or assisting staff to gain qualifications when training is not accessible.

Socio-economic differences

Focus groups were held in different socio-economic areas. These differences were highlighted in any issues that touched on balancing affordability and quality. Not surprisingly, areas with higher concentrations of families on low and/or single incomes were more likely to view any cost increase as a concern. For these parents, quality remained associated with having 'caring staff' and while they wanted improvements the reality of cost increases meant that they downplayed research indicating qualifications impacted on quality. In contrast, parents for whom cost was not such an issue were more in favour of qualifications and other quality improvements. While this may be linked to parent's own education levels, it appeared to be more related to income and household formation (which may in turn be linked to education).

3.2 Responses to issues for FDC

Issues relating to ratios for under two year olds

Parents in the two groups were broadly supportive of having restrictions for the number of children under two per carer, but also thought that this would need to be implemented carefully. A few parents raised the issue of children with additional needs that could impact on the overall number as well as age level of children that a carer could adequately look after. Parents were also concerned that this restriction might decrease the number of overall places for FDC.

However the main concern was that of affordability. The majority of parents in one group were particularly concerned with any potential rise in fees, as most were on low incomes and/or were single parents. This group considered even a rise in fees of a few dollars would tip the balance for them in terms of affordability. A minority of parents in this group and parents in the other FDC group were less concerned about the issue of affordability and said they were willing to pay more for increased quality in care.

Excursions

Parents were mixed in their responses to the issue of applying the same ratios for excursions to FDC as centre based care. Many thought that it is very important for carers to offer experiences outside the home, going to a local park or to pick up children from school. Others did not have confidence that a single person can manage small numbers of children crossing the street and so felt the restrictions should be applied, while recognising the impact this would have on carers and on children.

Qualifications of carers

In one of the groups, none of the parents were supportive of having a minimum qualification requirement for carers. In their view, the monitoring and support provided by the scheme coordinators, the accreditation system and DoCS regulations were sufficient safeguards of quality. This group felt that having clear qualification requirements for support staff at the scheme level was important, due to this overseeing and support role.

In the second group there was a more varied response, acknowledging that training was important but more concerned about how it could be introduced. This group suggested a process of mandatory professional development with core competencies (that may eventually lead to a formal qualification) that must be undertaken on an ongoing basis to maintain registration as a carer. This group also had the view that all carers should have mandatory first aid, child protection and OH&S training.

Arguments against the introduction of a minimum qualification included:

- CALD carers struggling to gain qualifications due to language and time limitations
- affordability of training and time for FDC is critical
- qualifications are not the deciding factor or priority when looking for a carer, the connection to the carer and instinct are key.
- lots of older workers are very experienced and wouldn't be learning anything from a Cert III

When discussing qualifications parents in this group thought that qualifications were more important in relation to the age of a child. In their view, when a child is young you need safe and loving care; when a child is older there is a need for stimulation and staff that are trained.

3.3 Issues relating to qualifications in centre based care

Minimum qualifications

Most parents were unaware of the qualification requirements operating in centre-based care. Most had assumed that all staff had qualifications and when informed of the current requirements, had to adjust their knowledge of individual staff with this information. This process may have influenced responses, as parents viewed the services their children attended as quality services with skilled staff. It is not known whether the services concerned had more trained staff than is currently required by regulation; however parents, in thinking about what they know of individual staff qualities, may have a tendency to discount the importance of training.

Only one of the LDC focus groups thought minimum qualifications for all staff should be introduced. The other LDC was located in a rural area and were concerned that if minimum qualifications were introduced it would be difficult to gain qualified staff. One of the preschool focus groups was also opposed to minimum qualifications, while the other wanted staff qualified but were concerned about cost implications.

Reasons for opposing minimum qualifications included:

“It's more about someone's personality and how they deal with people than what qualifications they have. There should be some trained staff to support unqualified workers” (preschool)

“if a minimum qualification was implemented how many services would close down, especially in rural areas as a result of an increase in costs and a reduction in employable staff? (LDC)

“a piece of paper from uni/TAFE can mean nothing if the carer doesn’t have the personal attributes needed to care for children” (LDC)

Some parents were accepting of the introduction of minimum qualifications but had concerns about how they would apply:

“if untrained workers are over 50 when the new regulations come into affect or have 20 years experience they shouldn’t need the minimum qualifications” (LDC)

“need to have recognition of prior learning” (LDC)

“need to take into account geographical area as in many rural areas it is hard to find let alone train staff” LDC.

Parents in the group that supported the introduction of minimum qualifications emphasised the need for a minimum set of staff competencies, like in all other industries and felt that staff should have prior learning assessed and recognised in the process. One parent noted that “there is a certain level of maturity and wisdom gained through studying that is helpful in any profession’, a statement that was supported by others in the group.

Teaching staff

In relation to changing the requirement for how many children require an early childhood trained teacher to be employed, there were mixed views. Many parents noted that the numbers of 20 children versus 29 children seemed arbitrary.

Some supported clearer requirements, including having more clarity about the role of the Early Childhood Teacher (ECT). Parents who supported wider use of teachers were concerned about their absence and that parents did not know about the range of qualifications and the current regulation. They felt more confidence with staff who had higher qualifications, particularly for preschool aged children (“if there are no qualified teachers at a service, you may as well just get a babysitter”). They pointed out the increase in the Child Care Tax Rebate may help offset rises in cost.

Most parents were concerned about the costs associated with this requirement and lacked certainty that an ECT was needed rather than a diploma level. Parents wanted greater understanding on the differences between roles and qualifications for different aged children. Some suggested that in smaller centres university trained teachers could be shared with another centre to minimise costs and increase the availability of teachers. These teachers would have a greater staff mentoring role with less qualified staff.

First aid and child protection training

All groups thought that all childcare workers should have up to date first aid and child protection training, with many parents surprised that this was not already a requirement.

3.4 Changing ratios and balancing affordability and cost

In October 2008 the NSW Government announced that a 1:4 ratio would be introduced in 2010 for children under two years of age. Many parents were unaware of current ratios. One of these groups drew parents from a range of centres, and none of these knew what ratios were currently applying. In the other LDC group, more parents were aware of the ratios (which were already 1:4). This centre had two babies groups of 10 children, placed in two rooms with two staff per room, and with another staff member floating between the two groups as needed.

Some parents were concerned that the ratio issue should also be considered in relation to qualifications – increase in the numbers of unqualified staff may not achieve higher quality. Another concern related to centres that had little flexibility in relation to space and whether the changed ratios would therefore result in fewer babies being cared for.

Parents in the centre based groups felt that the changed ratios should be consistently applied across services, including family day care.

Ratios were also discussed in relation to older children, with many parents thinking these ratios should also be reviewed and the numbers of children to staff lowered (suggestions ranged from 1:5 to 1:7).

Parents were mixed in relation to issues of cost. The majority supported the changed ratios, but for some the implied cost increases were concerning as they had little budget flexibility: “I want both quality and affordability, but I can only afford so much”.

3.5 Compliance and enforcement

Parents in all groups were very keen to have more information about breaches and about how their services complied. This was an issue that generated considerable discussion and overall there was consistency between groups in identifying issues and suggesting how they should be dealt with. Only in one area, that of how individual carers are dealt with, were there differences between service types.

Parents views on serious breaches

Parents were asked to identify the types of breaches they felt warranted greater penalties. There was considerable consistency in what was perceived to be of concern:

Physical harm and safety

- any physical harm caused should mean a severe punishment (with exceptions e.g. kids runs onto road carer pulls them back and bruises child’s arm in the processes) but accidents where carer is at fault e.g. baby falls off a change table should be included
- physical punishment/abuse of children
- equipment not being set up properly or dangerously
- hazardous materials cupboard not being locked or materials being left in a child’s reach
- safety issues e.g. locked fire doors should receive a severe punishment.

Inadequate supervision:

- leaving child alone on change table
- not properly supervising children during outside playtime
- not properly supervising children in care (in general)
- children having access to things or areas they shouldn't have access to
- leaving children unsupervised or with strangers
- ratios – carers going over their limits.

Learning and behaviour management:

- emotional abuse should receive severe punishment
- not stimulating children's development should be followed up
- leaving kids asleep too long (lack of stimulation).

Other issues:

- nappy rash all the time from not changing nappies
- not being contacted when child involved in incident (injury).

How breaches should be dealt with

Parents agreed that better differentiation between levels of breaches needed to occur and that DoCS needed to be able to apply a range of measures to gain compliance. One group suggested that a points system be introduced, with more points for more serious infringements as occurs in driving licenses, resulting in time with a loss of licence if further breaching/non-compliance was found. Parents were supportive of fines, infringement notices and the introduction of strict time limits for compliance.

A number of parents in the centre based groups also wanted individual staff members to be held responsible for breaches, incurring a fine, being required to undertake training and ultimately being dismissed. They saw this as not simply the responsibility of individual centres management, but also of DoCS and the regulatory system.

This was not true of FDC groups, who did not want individual carers named and shamed or fined. Parents in these groups related to individual carers as the service provider, not the scheme as a whole, so focused their concern on this issue in relation to carers.

Information about breaches and actions taken by DoCS

Parents wanted greater capacity to easily make complaints about a service and wanted DoCS to keep them informed about actions taken as a result of addressing breaches.

Parents wanted letters from DoCS where a major breach has occurred and for services to have to inform parents. Some parents wanted a sign placed in the service that could be removed when the service was found to be complying.

Parents were supportive of greater use of the DoCS website to show when services had been visited and the outcomes of visits. The 'name and shame' approach was strongly supported across groups. Some modified this approach, suggesting that this would only occur where a series of breaches had consistently occurred or where it was a major breach.