

Do we deserve a nanny state?

SHIFT WORKERS AND WOMEN BOSSES WANT SUBSIDIES
BUT THERE ARE DOUBTS ABOUT INTRODUCING THE
NANNY STATE, WRITES **LISA POWER**



If Mary Poppins hadn't worked for such an upper-crust family, perhaps the popular perception of nannies wouldn't be so polarising. Instead in-home child carers are often viewed as Victorian era servants of the wealthy and have now become the lightning rods for a class war over childcare rebates.

Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has proposed that nannies and in-home care may deserve government rebates and would allow parents to choose the type of childcare options that suit them best.

But Childcare Minister Kate Ellis has dug in to the opposite position, saying the existing pool of money for care would need to be raided to pay for the nannies, probably at the expense of low-income workers relying on government-regulated childcare centres. The federal government claims that adding nannies to the subsidised care mix could cost the taxpayer an additional \$2 billion in the first four years, a burden Ellis says cannot be justified. Nor, she says, can government cash be spent on nannies doing housework or chauffeuring children to classes.

Caring for children is a big and confusing business.

Federal government subsidies for childcare bills totalled \$955 million for just

the June quarter last year. That figure could potentially be higher, with an estimated 27 per cent of families too confused by the labyrinth of rebates and paperwork to lodge claims.

One in four children up to the age of 12 attend care, with almost one million children registered with approved

childcare. That is an 11 per cent growth in a single year.

But does conventional centre-based care still fit modern working life? Longer work hours, shift work, weekend work and lengthy commutes make even the extended hours of long-day care problematic for many parents.

David Wilson, president of the National In-Home Care Association, says that while centre-based care is the gold standard, the future of direction of child care must be flexible.

"We are moving to a seven-day-a-week society. At the moment the flexibility is just not there. That is the problem. It is do-able, we have the infrastructure, it is just a matter of getting the political will to expand it."

Wilson's association covers about 55 in-home care rebated services nationally. But a cap on places means the service is restricted to about 6000 places and priority is given to kids and parents with disabilities

and illness, rural and remote families or those with three children under school age.

"Because it is a capped scheme, it does not get a chance to go out to the shift-working parents as much as it

could," he says. "The bottom line is the government and the modern childhood award lists in-home care so... what they should be doing is expanding the in-home program using the model they have got."

Danielle Robertson, CEO of nanny provider Dial-An-Angel, says that working parents are often stuck when holidays and ill-health are thrown into the mix.

She argues that most clients are not privileged but hard-working families juggling childcare and work.

"That is just such a misconception," she says.

"We have got clients out west, down south, on the central coast and Newcastle. A lot of people will make sure their kids have got quality childcare before they go out for dinner.

"There are always going to be clients who can afford a 60-hour-a-week professional child carer but we are talking about mums and dads who need a couple of days a week of a part-time nanny. We have clients who are nurses, policewomen, fire brigade members and even army and navy people. They get sent away for weeks of time and need support. It is a hell of a



Right: Has supernanny Mary Poppins given her colleagues a bad name?
Below: Minister Kate Ellis visits a childcare centre.

struggle for people who don't have family support, and not everyone has family living near them any more."

Robertson estimates a 15 per cent growth in part-time nannies over the past decade. Her position has won support from unlikely allies: union bosses. The head of Australia's largest union, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, this week backed Abbott's proposal. National secretary Joe de Bruyn suggests a means tested childcare rebate could be extended to include in-home care and called the current system "extremely discriminatory" for giving no benefit to families who did not use formal centre-based care.

"Let the mother decide what form of childcare she wishes to use," he says.

Australian Nursing Federation federal secretary Lee Thomas says her shift-working members are frustrated with current care arrangements and rebates.

"Nurses continue to

express frustration at the lack of long-hours child care available," she says. "While there are some longer-hour childcare facilities available, they are not commonplace. Childcare should be available to meet the specific needs of working parents 24 hours, seven days per week."

The lobby group Make Care Fair, of which Robertson is a member, wants the federal government to make the full cost of childcare a deduction against taxable income. It points to the fact that each dollar spent on childcare by the government reaps \$1.86 in revenue. The campaign is backed by a group of businesswomen whose research shows that 48 per cent of women say the cost of childcare restricts their careers, but not the careers of their partners. They claim that 51 per cent of women surveyed say one parent will quit their jobs if the cost of childcare increases.

Lyn Connolly, of the Australian Childcare Alliance,

agrees that families should be given a choice of care but stresses: NSW centre-based care is the best in the world.

"The reason we have to have the accreditation system is because we are accessing government money for families," she says. "We have to prove we are offering high quality child care and early learning. The mind boggles as to how nannies are going to be able to meet the stringent requirements."

Connolly suggests a restricted level of in-home care could be extended to areas of need but says the quality of centre-based care must not be undermined as a result.

Wilson says the raging community debate, combined with union and business backing, is "recognition that the current childcare mix is not working for many families".

He believes that bringing informal in-home care into the mix could help capture an estimated \$2 billion in black market revenue for the government.

"There are probably 30,000 or 35,000 'nannies' out there working who are not part of the in-home childcare scheme," he says. "They are unregulated, unsupervised and not getting superannuation. People are not paying tax on those salaries. We make sure the system runs according to the national guidelines. It works on a small scale: there is no reason it can't work on a large scale."

He says Ellis's reservations about taxpayer money being used to perform housework are justified. In-home carers are qualified early childhood educators, not servants doing family chores.

"I don't really like the use of the word nanny," he says. "If you ask me about about a nanny, I go back to the 1800s and Mary Poppins. People cannot get chauffeured around and you don't do housework. If the parents break the rules, there are consequences."

Maybe nannies need a nanny state to protect them after all.



*Let the mother
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A WORKING MUM

DANCER Brenda Jackson is a working mum for whom a childcare centre has not been an option.

When her first child, Sebastian, was born nearly 12 years ago, a long commute and late work hours made pick-ups impossible.

Now the demands of a second child, one-year-old Dillon, combined with running a busy dance school, have made a nanny essential.

Jackson's children need care while she teaches ballet and other dance styles at her Newtown Dance Academy after school and over the weekend. Having a nanny available means she can still teach even if one of her boys is ill.

"Flexibility is the main reason I use a nanny," she says.

"So many of the childcare centres

close at 6pm but with the nanny you can do anything. Now I own my own dance school so I teach tiny tots in the daytime and I work all day Saturday. I can't teach with a 1½-year-old."

She believes extending the rebate to in-home care would empower more women to return to the work force. Even a token rebate would be "better than nothing", Jackson says.

"Women are having to go back into the workforce, so we have more choice (of job) if we get these other options available to us.

"Neither my partner Tim (nor) I have any family in Sydney so Karen (the nanny) is great.

"She has been with us for eight years and it is total peace of mind. She is a magical nanny."

Karen, who met the Jacksons via Dial-An-Angel, says working families

were turning to nannies for help.

She has noticed a trend for clients to have no extended family nearby and older mums with grandparents unable to keep up with energetic children.

The 58-year-old became a professional nanny after working as a foster carer and running a family daycare in her own home for a decade.

Karen says the implementation in January of one carer for every four children under two years of age would also drive the need for nannies.

"That is much better for the carer and the children but it is going to put the costs up again," she says.

"It would be nice if they did (extend rebates to in-home care). It would make all the difference to a lot of families and take the pressure off long day care centres and family day care."



Part-time nanny Karen (above left) with Brenda Jackson and her sons Dylan McEntee, 18 months, and Sebastian Jackson, 11. Picture: Kym Smith