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# House of horrors: What the ABC revealed about early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia now

By Marg Rogers

The ABC's *Four Corners* television episode *'Betrayal of Trust: Australia's Childcare Crisis'* into the worst excesses of the troubled early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector was gruesome viewing. This article discusses the central challenges the program revealed rather than the horrific stories of abuse, injury, and neglect. Such reports are likely to scare parents with over [a million families](#) and almost 1.4 million children using Government-subsidised services.

The ABC's six-month investigation revealed what happens when the values and goals of education and care are misaligned with corporate agendas but are fuelled by Government

policies and practices. While the program interviewed a service director within a service where the children had a chance to flourish, and the system worked well, these scenes were few and far between.

These services supposedly make up about [90% of the sector](#). Such services are said to meet or exceed sector standards set by the ECEC federal governing body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority ([ACECQA](#)).

## Under-reporting

However, as the investigative journalist, Adele Ferguson, revealed, there is an under-reporting of breaches of the [national standards](#) as educators fear losing their jobs. Additionally, many services are not accredited by the state and territory authorities. Even those services with breaches are still often able to open new services. One of the challenges within the system is that the federal and state and territory governments share responsibilities, and therefore can blame each other when things go wrong.

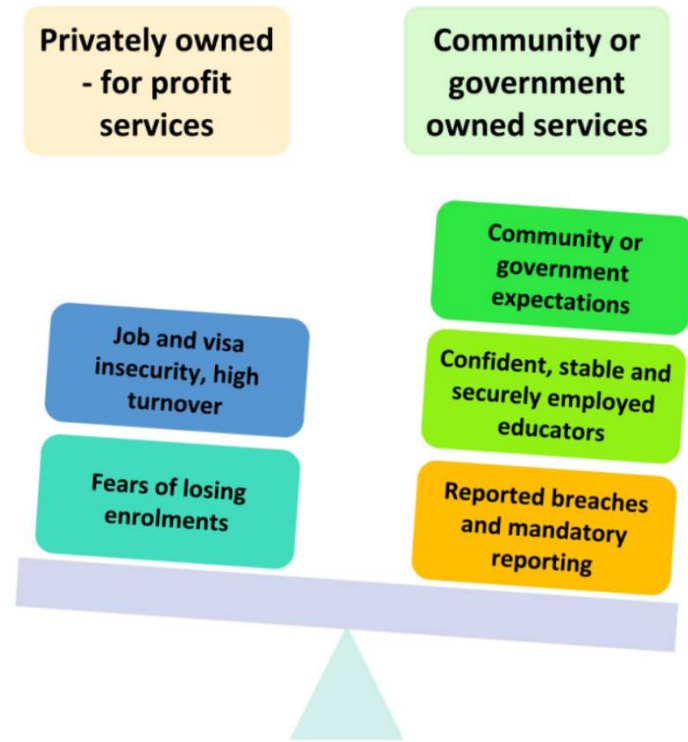
The episode is like the nursery rhyme:

There was a little girl,  
Who had a little curl,  
Right in the middle of her forehead.  
When she was good  
She was very, very good,  
And when she was bad she was horrid.

Many very, very good community-led and for-profit services in Australia are supporting children to thrive. But there is also the house of horrors as Four Corners revealed. So then, how did we get here?

## A misalignment of values and goals

When we try to marry corporate values to make a profit with the wholesome philosophies of education and care, there is bound to be a misalignment. Education and care were once mainly entrusted to families, community and government organisations. It cannot be said that there were no breaches in these types of care. That said, the starting point was generally agreed upon as being that children had a right to education and care to reach their potential. In this not-for-profit model, there is no need to keep shareholders happy and keep enrolments full at all times. There are many instances in Australia where this model works very well, for example, community preschools, mobile preschools, ECEC services attached to schools, [family daycare](#) overseen by community bodies, and long daycare services operated by shire councils and other educational organisations (such as universities).



ECEC

Figure 1: *The balancing act between for-profit and community and government owned services*

In these places of work (shown in Figure 1), educators are more likely to:

- Be permanent employees;
- Enjoy working in an environment where they can access leave and professional development and generally work with reasonable child-to-educator ratios, and
- Feel empowered to report breaches and be true to their role as [mandatory reporters](#). This is because the power dynamic is quite different to for-profit providers. The educator knows this is a community or government-owned service that their rates or taxpayer dollars fund. They are more likely to report misconduct because it is what the community expects, and they are less likely to face negative ramifications from those within the service. While community and government ownership and funding sources are transparent in these cases, it can be quite different in for-profit services.

## Power dynamics and hidden funding

In for-profit services, there are more likely to be more casual employees and **higher staff attrition**. This is the case with any **profit-oriented social service**. Attrition often feeds on itself as it negatively impacts all concerned, creating **attrition cycles** (see Figure 2). Insecure work means workers have less power, so they are more likely to comply with employees' demands and keep quiet when things go wrong (see Figure 1). This might include deliberately ignoring breaches, such as not following guidelines for educator-to-child ratios,

not providing children with adequate nutrition or care, as well as injuries, abuse, and children going missing. Additionally, there are likely to be higher numbers of staff sponsored by the organisation on temporary visas, adding to the insecurity they feel.

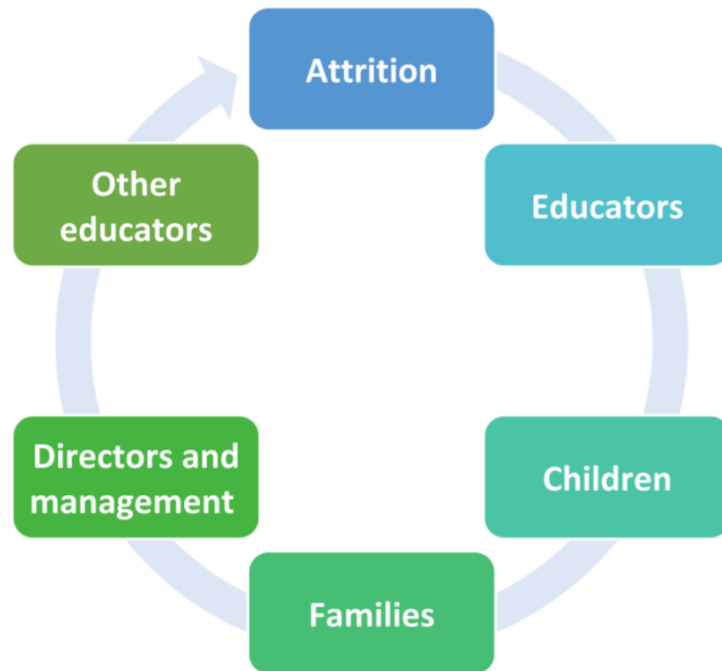


Figure 2: *Cycle of attrition of ECEC educators (from Rogers, 2025)*

Adding to this mix is the hidden government funding. Educators and families are often not aware of how much tax-payer funding is poured into ECEC services. The vast majority of these are privately owned, with Australia having one of the highest levels of for-profit services in the world, and this is increasing. Educators unaware of this funding may be less likely to hold the company accountable than they would in a community or government-owned service.

## Hidden government funding

While there are a few single-service providers, most of Australia's for-profit services are run by over 60 large providers with [25 services or more](#). These are often male-led publicly listed companies, meaning they need to keep their shareholders happy. [They profit](#) from generous Government funding designed to encourage the private sector to open services due to the high demand for ECEC services.

In a market-driven economy, enthusiasts of this system would say those services that are not performing well will not be used, will experience debt, and eventually close. However, this is not the case due to generous Government subsidies that fuel the system.

Also, there is an overwhelming shortage of educators, as Australia now needs a further [21,000 educators](#) to meet demand. There is also a lack of services, especially in 'childcare desert' areas, mainly in regional, rural and remote areas and low-income metropolitan suburbs where three or more families are competing for one enrolment space. Families are desperate for access to ECEC services due to the cost of living crisis, household debt, and the desire for their children to have a head-start in learning before they go to school.

## What is this doing to our children, families and educators?

The impact on children is devastating, as we know any [trauma](#) that occurs within the first few years of their lives can have profound consequences for their development. Also, when their child experiences trauma, their lives change as they are then dealing with the impacts of trauma within the household every day. For parents, especially women, and carers, these problems in the system fuel potential feelings of guilt for leaving their children to go to work. For educators, the news is probably no surprise. Many have witnessed or heard of the challenges in some services, while others have moved to other services or left the sector to escape.

While leaving the sector might seem like a good idea, the Four Corners episode revealed how this impacts qualified, dedicated and passionate educators. Many of them talked of mental health crises potentially fuelled by [moral injury](#). They were disillusioned and disappointed that the current system allows this to happen when educators are dedicated and passionate about the children and families they support.

Leaving the sector means walking away from qualifications they have spent years studying for, many of them accumulating debt to do so. Despite recent pay increases for some, educators are still one of the lowest-paid workers, 92 per cent female, in Australia.

## Where to from here?

The Government, ACECQA and the state and territory regulators must urgently meet with organisations such as The Parenthood, Thrive by Five and other advocacy groups. They need to meet with educators in both community and not-for-profit groups. They should heed these groups' recommendations to reform the system. Thanks to the work of the ABC, this can no longer be hidden away. The girl with the curl in her hair can be very, very good, and so can our ECEC services. Importantly, our children, families, educators and taxpayers deserve very, very good services.

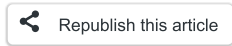


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Header image is a still from the Four Corners program.

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