



Calls for purpose-built childcare centres for children with a disability amid 'discrimination'

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Highlight: Everyone has a legal right to access childcare, but very few facilities have the staff or equipment to cater to children with a disability. That may soon be about to change.

Body

Felicity Thompson bought just one thing for her unborn daughter — a tiny outfit to bury her in.

The Perth nurse had been told her baby would probably die.

Then, when she was 30 weeks pregnant, doctors said the baby would live and diagnosed her with Russell-Silver Syndrome.

Audrey, who is now two-and-a-half, was born with proportional dwarfism.

That means she struggles to gain weight, needs a feeding tube, is immuno-compromised and has gross motor delays.

Felicity tried to return to work, but the local childcare centre refused to take Audrey.

"I've always worked full-time, even when I've had my other four children.

"I've always valued that part of my life but I can't leave her [and] she got really sick when I started trying to go back to work, so it's a full-time job."

Housebound for over two years

Watching Felicity cradle Audrey in her arms, it's obvious how much she adores her little girl.

But 24/7 care-giving has taken a toll and Felicity desperately needs a break.

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"I haven't been out of the house without her for two-and-a-half years," she said.

"Just to be able to go out, spend time with my friends and have a normal five minutes to myself.

"It doesn't sound like much to many people but to me, it would mean the world.

"In the 1960s, kids like Audrey were hidden in institutions; now they're just hidden at home."

'Huge' barriers to accessing childcare

Everyone has a legal right to access childcare under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

In reality, very few facilities have the staff or equipment to cater for high-needs children and they don't have to make changes that would cause "unjustifiable hardship".

Monique Power started her company Ripple Ability to help parents navigate the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) after her own experience advocating for her daughter left her frustrated.

She and her colleagues realised the extent of the problem when a funeral for one of their young clients was attended by many children, all of whom couldn't be put in childcare.

Their research has since exposed the barriers to accessing childcare for kids with disabilities.

"We know that childcare centres are discriminating against [these] children," Ms Power said.

Ripple Ability has rung dozens of childcare centres in Western **Australia** trying to find care for clients.

"We were met with a resounding no ... the ones that we didn't get an explicit no from said we'll call you back [and] we never heard from them again," she said.

Need for purpose-built centres

Ms Power believes the answer is a new model, involving purpose-built centres with flexible hours, equipment and medically trained staff and therapists.

"Parents would know [their child] is in a safe space and could walk away feeling confident about that," she said.

"Kids with complex needs don't miraculously become better.

"But they would have an opportunity to make friends and build social networks with people that look like them and have lives like theirs, which makes a huge difference on mental health in the long run."

Ms Power believes having access to such a centre would also be life-changing for parents.

"It will provide people with the opportunity to pursue higher education [or] hold down a meaningful career," she said.

"But in addition to that, a centre like this would provide women with the opportunity to go to a gynaecology appointment alone or go out for coffee with a friend that they haven't seen for three years."

There are significant barriers to opening such a centre, however, including the current childcare subsidy offered to parents.

"We could open a model like this tomorrow but there's no way that [families] can afford it and that's the biggest problem," Ms Power said.

"We need a new subsidy through Services **Australia** that has these children in mind to cater for the skills necessary to provide that level of care.

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"You're going to have to pay a paediatric nurse \$75 an hour ... so the subsidy needs to offer these families the sort of rebate that every other family enjoys under the current childcare legislation."

'Game-changing' childcare centre on the cards

Despite the barriers, some childcare centres are still working hard to be inclusive.

Lake Joondalup Early Learning Program has been running for 12 years and welcomes children of all abilities and needs.

Co-founders Debra Gibson and Jodie Jones are hoping to build a second facility on the same site that caters to children with more complex clinical needs.

"I think it's going to be huge — a game changer," Ms Jones said.

"All those children that have fallen through the gaps through the years — to finally have something they can access is actually really exciting."

Like Ripple Ability, they've identified inadequate childcare subsidies as a barrier to the plan.

"Right now we fund extra support so these children can receive one-to-one care but that's coming at a cost to our service," Ms Gibson said.

"One of our concerns is that we're going to be dipping into the current service here to actually fund the new service out the back — obviously that's not viable for the long term."

The centre is in talks with the Federal Minister for Early Childhood Education **Anne Aly** to become a pilot facility for a new childcare subsidy model.

"We're not sure what it will look like because we're waiting to hear back but we're pretty excited about it," Ms Jones said.

Barriers under review

Aside from the issue of subsidies, advocates also spent years campaigning for legislative change.

Childcare providers aren't currently covered under the Disability Standards for Education Act 2005.

Three government reviews have flagged this as a problem, with the most recent in 2020 recommending that draft amendments be prepared to extend the law to childcare centres.

The Federal Minister for Early Childhood Education **Anne Aly** said that work is happening.

There are also two separate inquiries underway into early childhood education and care.

The Productivity Commission is due to release its draft report in November, while the ACCC will hand down its final report on supply of childcare services in December.

"I don't want to pre-empt anything that comes out of the Productivity Commission review or the ACCC review, but I know a lot of the consultation that's gone out has had ... input from parents of children with disability ... and the things that they have said will be taken into account," Ms Aly said.

"I see a huge opportunity here for us to really come together as a government across those different portfolios, as we have done with the Early Years Strategy."

Advocates sceptical reviews will lead to change

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Monique Power will launch a petition this week calling for better access to childcare.

"I am an optimist ... but I am incredibly pessimistic that [any] changes will [reflect] the cohort of kids that we're dealing with," she said.

"Am I optimistic that the government is going to address the most critical and vulnerable [kids] in our society with these reforms?

"I'm not confident at all."

Ripple Ability has made submissions to the inquires but is struggling to get meetings with relevant ministers, including Ms Aly.

"We want an audience with them to have a conversation about the extensive body of work that we have done and the solutions that we have put together ... to start the ball rolling towards some meaningful change," Ms Power said.

"We're real people and we need real solutions."

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