

NACEW Childcare Seminar: Workshop on Issues for Sole Parents

Discussion points from the workshop included the following:

- Sole parents have different childcare needs than parents from two parent families. They use more care for longer hours per day, more weeks in the year and have a lower average income than two parent families.
- Work and family arrangements tend to result in a greater juggling act for sole parents than for parents in two parent families.
- Sole parents, especially female sole parents, use informal care arrangements less frequently than two-parent households,. This may be because formal arrangements are more likely to be reliable and predictable.
- Difficulties with childcare are more likely to be experienced by sole parent families with little social support or support from family members.
- It was acknowledged that it is difficult to generalise about sole parents as a group or to generalise about Maori or Pacific Island sole parents. Different factors need to be taken into account such as whether sole parents have networks or live in rural or urban areas, and their income level
- People providing informal care may be penalised if they are receiving income support and have a work obligation. Concern was expressed that some Barnardo's carers and carers from within the family/whanau are forced to stop providing informal care and that this activity should be exempt from the work test.
- Although some informal care may be "free of charge", there may still be other costs in terms of time or other exchanges. Transport is also a significant cost for parents using care, including parents using informal care.
- Difficulties in accessing care and the costs of care may force parents to use low quality care. Such care has negative consequences for both parents and children.
- The quality of childcare is difficult to assess and incorrect assumptions may be made about quality e.g. care offered by a neighbour may be of better quality than that provided by some formal childcare centres.
- Culturally appropriate childcare services are important and are sometimes in short supply.
- Maintaining high quality childcare services is important for working parents. Concern was expressed that under the Wisconsin 'welfare to work' approach, extra childcare is available but the standard of childcare services has reduced.
- Concern was expressed that because of the increasing number of casual and part-time jobs, some sole parents need to amalgamate two or more jobs to meet their 15 hour part-time work obligation. This makes childcare arrangements complicated and impose a huge juggling act for parents.
- There is a gap in the care of teenagers. OSCAR services cater for children aged 10 to 11 yet young people cannot be left alone until age 14. This can lead to youth offending, at risk behaviour, suicide and other social problems affecting youth. It also sends a message that caring for young people and young people's welfare are not important. A further problem is the lack of policies to support teenage parents and poor implementation of initiatives to help

prevent teenage pregnancies.

- Sole parents may face social isolation and additional stresses associated with being the sole decision maker. Stress at work and poverty exacerbate the problem.

Suggestions from the workshop included the following:

- The need for properly funded, quality childcare
- Providing universal, free childcare -- or at least in this direction. Overseas countries with high labour force participation of mothers provide generous childcare and parental leave provisions
- Improving the funding of childcare services for those wanting longer hours of care
- Improving subsidies for different types of care including emergency care
- The childcare subsidy should be available for sufficient hours of respite care as some sole parents have high stress levels
- Providing care to deal with unpredictable crises and improving leave provisions for family reasons and other family friendly policies in the workplace
- Promoting a family friendly environment in schools and tertiary institutions
- The need for significant attitudinal change to care, caring responsibilities and carers
- A more gradual abatement regime to enable parents to retain a greater proportion of the benefit while in employment
- Ensuring that increased provision of childcare retains the quality of care for the benefit of children
- Issues surrounding the care of teenagers (10 -14 years) need to receive greater attention in debates on child care.
- Post placement support and the reinstatement of the former level of assistance provided through the Training Incentive Allowance would assist sole parents.
- People providing informal care should be exempt from the work test. Alternatively, the DPB should be paid as a benefit for carers.
- Schools should be made accountable for delivering the health curriculum, including sex education, as intended. There should be adequate follow-up and support for teen parents who have dropped out of the education system by one central government agency that has responsibility for overseeing issues supporting teenage parents.