

Choosing childcare

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS

From daycare to kindergarten



Private centre, home-based care, Playcentre, kindergarten... the world of early childhood education is complex and often expensive. No wonder parents and caregivers are overwhelmed when it comes to choosing. With most mums and dads in paid work now, the number of preschoolers in care and education facilities is higher than ever. So what should you be looking for as a parent? Why does it cost so much? And which is the best option for you and your child? The Herald finds out in a 6-part Premium series. **Simon Collins** reports

When Brian Moore applied for a new job at accounting firm Ernst and Young, he negotiated a four-day week so that he could go to Playcentre on Tuesdays.

Moore and his wife have a son Griffin, 2½, and an 8-month-old baby. He takes Griffin to the Eden-Epsom Playcentre on Tuesday mornings and his wife takes both children on three other mornings.

"It's a free-play approach and a fantastic ratio of parents to kids, so for the first two or three years it seems like a great way to have as much play as possible," Moore says.

Playcentre is not just for the kids – parents are also expected to do courses on early childhood which help them to run the Playcentres with other parents and also to be better parents for their own children.

"I was always going to be a relatively liberal parent anyway, but in terms of putting some

structure around that, it's been useful," Moore says. "One of the benefits has been having both my wife and I involved, because it means we are both on the same page."

Another Eden-Epsom Playcentre parent, Carol Chen, usually comes with her father as well as her two children Harper, 3, and Aria, 18 months.

"I love to come here because I always can play with my kids," she says. "Another thing is, we do speak Mandarin at home. Aria doesn't really understand English. Harper does, she can speak English."

Playcentre, a uniquely Kiwi institution founded in 1941, was for many years one of only two options for parents seeking early childhood education (ECE) for their children, along with kindergartens.

There are now six main service types to choose from. A catch-all group called "education and care centres" with 62 per cent of

enrolments; kindergartens (13 per cent); home-based care (8 per cent); Playcentre and kōhanga reo (4 per cent each); and unlicensed parent-run play groups (9 per cent).

Services across all these groups say they follow various philosophies such as Montessori, Steiner, Reggio Emilia and Pikler.

Most of our 4653 licensed services (86 per cent) are in English, but 11 per cent mainly speak te reo Māori and 3 per cent speak other languages including Tongan (52 services), Samoan (44), Mandarin (30), Cook Islands Māori (5), Somali (4), Niuean (3), Korean (2) and Dravidian, Dutch, Hindi, Japanese, Pukapukan, Punjabi and Russian (1 each).

Education and care centres

Aimee MacAskill's children Lachlan, 4, and Emily, 3, have always been in "education and care centres" – often described as daycare – but their experiences show the diversity of this category.

MacAskill works fulltime as a childcare manager herself, and both children started at 6 weeks old in a centre that she was managing in Hillcrest on Auckland's North Shore.

"Kindergarten or Playcentre was never an option for us, so we knew we would have to look for fulltime alternatives," MacAskill says.

In 2017 MacAskill got a new job managing the Unitec Early Learning Centre, a much bigger place licensed for 105 children.

It counts as "community-owned," which represents about a quarter of the education and care sector.

"It has beautiful large open spaces," she says. But she was also drawn to its philosophy,

which made it easy to move Lachlan and Emily with her. "For me as a parent, if their philosophy is heavily guided by core values around respect and love and empathy, that really aligns well with how I like to parent."

Then last year MacAskill moved again to manage the University of Auckland's six early childhood centres. This time her children have moved back to another small centre, Cottontails, licensed for 56 children in a converted historic cottage near the family home at Stanmore Bay, Whangaparāoa.

"My husband works close to home," she says. "They are with children they will go to school with."

And the centre is just across the road from the beach, with enough staff to take the children out to the park and occasionally to the Stanmore Bay splashpad.

Even though both children get the ECE subsidy for 20 hours a week, the family pay \$200 a week for 40 hours of care for each.

Just under 40 per cent of infants under 1 in ECE services are now in education and care centres, rising to 63-65 per cent of enrolments at all other ages from 1 to 4.

Kindergartens

Kindergartens, meaning "children's gardens" in German, originated in Germany in the 1830s and reached New Zealand in the 1880s with a philosophy that young children should learn through play in a natural environment.

Throughout the 20th century most NZ mothers cared for their children at home, perhaps going with them to Playcentre or play groups, until they were old enough for kin-

dergarten at age 3 or 4. As late as 2002, when full age data begins, almost half (48 per cent) of 4-year-olds in ECE attended kindergartens, compared with only 34 per cent in education and care centres.

At that time 90 per cent of kindergarten enrolments were still "sessional", or half-day, as decreed by the Education Act, which still defines "a free kindergarten that is an early childhood service whose licence permits no child to attend for a period of more than four hours on any day".

By that definition, there are now no free kindergartens left. All children in kindergartens are now classed as "all-day" rather than "sessional". But the 654 kindergartens still run by kindergarten associations are still different in several ways:

- Most do not take children under 3 or sometimes 2, and have waiting lists. At Auckland's Laingholm Kindergarten, children are accepted off the waiting list in age order. At present they get in a month before they're 3.

- Most open only for school hours and close in the school holidays. Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) parents rebelled against longer hours, so all of their 106 kindergartens are open only six hours (77) or seven hours (29) a day.

- Kindergartens claim to be cheaper than other options, perhaps because they are non-profit and often on school or council land. AKA requests a "voluntary" \$150 an hour for the first 20 hours a week and charges \$6-\$8 an hour beyond that.

- Kindergarten associations employ only qualified teachers.

Kindergarten teachers are paid on the same scale as school teachers rising to \$80,500 after 12 years' service. The Early Childhood Council says qualified teachers in education and care centres with at least 10 years' experience earned an average of \$28-\$30 an hour last year, just \$58,240-\$62,400 a year. Kindergartens' higher pay rates mean they can pick the best teachers and the teachers stay.

But the parent revolt against extended hours has driven away working parents.

Kindergartens' share of all ECE enrolments has plunged especially for Asians (down from 36 per cent of Asians in ECE in 2002 to 11 per cent) and Pacific children (28 per cent to 11 per cent), and somewhat less for Europeans (26 per cent to 14 per cent) and Māori (23 per cent to 13 per cent).

Kindergartens' share of 4-year-olds in ECE has more than halved to 22 per cent.

Home-based care

Home-based care shows the opposite pattern to kindergartens. Its share of ECE enrolments falls steadily from 14 per cent of under-1s to 5 per cent of 4-year-olds, and it is more popular with Pacific families (16 per cent) and Asians (10 per cent) than with Europeans (7 per cent) or Māori (6 per cent).

Home-based ECE Association president Susan Phua says home-based educators, who can't have more than four children under 5 in the home including their own children, can serve children speaking a minority language.

"If they go to a home-based educator, there is much more flexibility to be in tune with the children's own regimes of sleep, eating and



Carol Chen and daughter Harper, 3 (left); 4-year-old Niko (top) explores at Hineteiwaia Te Kohanga Reo Centre at the University of Auckland (above); and (right) Brian Moore with son Griffin, 2, at the Eden-Epsom Playcentre.
Photos / Michael Craig (left), Dean Purcell



I love to come here because I always can play with my kids.

Carol Chen, Playcentre parent

families where both parents have gone back to work. They still have 6 per cent of European ECE enrolments, but only 2.5 per cent of Māori, 2 per cent of Asians and less than 1 per cent of Pasifika children.

Surprisingly, they have slightly increased their share of babies from 17 per cent of under-1 ECE enrolments in 2002 to 20 per cent. But what was a gradual fade-out at higher ages in 2002 has become a cliff-edge plunge to 6 per cent of 1-year-olds, then down gradually to 2 per cent of 4-year-olds.

Playcentre sessions are only two and a half to four hours, and children under 3 must have a parent or other family member with them.

"At our centre, our requirement [for parent attendance] is a minimum of two sessions a week," says Chen at Eden-Epsom.

But because most have no paid staff, it's totally free, although centres typically request donations averaging \$30 a term.

Kōhanga reo

Kōhanga reo ("language nests") say they are not an ECE service at all, although they have been funded and regulated as such by the Ministry of Education since 1990. They were started by Māori families in 1981 "to ensure the survival and revival of te reo Māori" and "to develop and upskill the whānau".

Kōhanga peaked in 1993 at 14,514 tamariki, or half of all Māori in ECE.

But they have since declined to just 8488 children last year, the lowest since 1985, and now have only 17 per cent of Māori ECE enrolments.

The Waitangi Tribunal found in 2012 that the ECE funding and regulatory regime "failed to adequately sustain the specific needs of kōhanga reo as an environment for language transmission and whānau development".

Kōhanga are often on marae. Auckland University's kōhanga Hineteiwaia is in a bush setting down behind the university marae, and children play in and look after the flax and other native plants around them.

"What we do is ensure we speak te reo to the children," says kaiako (teacher) Rahera Shepherd. "They may not speak it confidently but they understand what we are doing and every so often they respond in te reo. For us that is a breakthrough."

Kaiako are paid, but parents and whānau are expected to attend monthly meetings, take part in excursions and fundraising and, at Hineteiwaia, they attend a noho marae (sleepover) once a year at the marae of one of the whānau.

Hours and fees vary. Hineteiwaia is open from 8am-5:30pm and charges non-students \$310 a week for a child under 2 or \$294 aged 2. Children aged 3 and 4 get 20 hours free, then pay \$8.75 for every extra hour.

Play groups

Unlicensed play groups, which have no paid staff, are still a popular option for parents who don't work fulltime. The ministry funds them at \$151 an hour per child if they are certificated and more than half of the children have a parent with them.

As with Playcentres, play groups have held their shares at 11 per cent of European children in ECE and 5 per cent of Māori over the past 20 years, but have lost Asian and Pacific families where both parents worked fulltime.

In particular, play groups have collapsed from 27 per cent of Pasifika ECE enrolments in 2002 to just 6 per cent. Children in specific Pacific Island play groups have dwindled from 2740 to just 126.

Pafitimala Salā Dr Fa'asaulala Tagolelagi-Leota, who heads the national body of a'o'a amata (Samoan-language licensed preschools), says the declines parallel a drop from about 70 a'o'a amata in the late 1990s to 46 today due to tighter English-language requirements for early childhood teachers which forced the closure of all dedicated Pacific ECE training courses.

"Centres have declined because of the shortage of teachers, which leads to a shortage of funds and not enough children," she says.

"Now we have the play groups declining. It's the beginning of a loss of hope and a loss of trust, and we are suffocating Pacific ECE."

The series

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Today: What are the options?
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