

Early childhood education minister refuses to say if independent inquiry into childcare standards will happen

Exclusive by political reporter **Claudia Long**

Child Care

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Early Childhood Education Minister Jess Walsh would not commit to a childcare inquiry despite growing safety concerns.

In short:

The early childhood education minister is refusing to say whether the federal government will establish an independent review of childcare standards.

The Productivity Commission recommended a review.

What's next?

The second half of a pay rise for early education and childcare workers is coming into effect from today.

The federal early childhood education minister will not say whether the government will establish an independent review of childcare standards, despite concerns that sexual predators have infiltrated the system.

Jess Walsh refused to say if there would be an independent review, as recommended by the Productivity Commission, despite being repeatedly asked in an interview with the ABC.

"When it comes to new bodies or new inquiries or new commissions, we are really focused on doing the work today to strengthen our system," she said.

The Productivity Commission [recommended an independent review](#) of national childcare standards, which covers child safety, governance and rules around quality assessments, among other issues.

Earlier this year, Four Corners investigations revealed [paedophiles had infiltrated the childcare system](#) and [exposed cases of child abuse](#), neglect, and injury, highlighting critical gaps in childcare safety and accountability.

Senator Walsh said Labor was still working through the Productivity Commission recommendations from September last year.

The minister pointed to an upcoming pay rise for childcare workers as part of the government's response.

Other measures include [a national system](#) to track the criminal history of those with a working-with-children check and mandatory safety training to help workers detect abuse.

From Monday, childcare workers will receive [the second part](#) of a government-funded pay rise, with an extra 5 per cent bump on top of the 10 per cent added last December.

Poor pay and conditions were noted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in 2023 and the Productivity Commission in 2024 as

Sexual abuse and assault support services:

- [1800 Respect national helpline](#): 1800 737 732
 - [Lifeline](#) (24-hour Crisis Line): 131 114
 - [Victims of Crime Helpline](#): 1800 819 817
 - [Blue Knot](#): 1300 657 380
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key problems for worker retention in the sector.

Minister focused on 'urgent reforms'

Asked whether the federal government would set up the independent review of standards recommended by the Productivity Commission, Senator Walsh instead referred to a separate recommendation for an early childhood commission that would provide independent advice to the government.

"It's really important to remember and recognise that the Productivity Commission in its report called for a commission, not for safety reasons, not for reasons about keeping our children safe," she said.

"When it comes to keeping children safe and when it comes to quality early childhood education, we're focused on the urgent reforms that are needed right now."

When pressed on the specific recommendation for an independent review of national quality standards, Senator Walsh said the government had done other things the Productivity Commission recommended, including abolishing the childcare subsidy activity test.

Senator Walsh would not say whether or not the government will set up the independent review.

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"We're responding to the Productivity Commission right now with the pay rise," she said.

"We're responding to it with our three-day guarantee, which starts in January to guarantee three days of childcare subsidy to every child in Australia."

Groups representing children and parents, including Thrive By Five and The Front Project, have called for the federal government to establish a national body to monitor childcare safety.

Parenthood chief executive Georgie Dent said a watchdog must be urgently established.

"Merely expanding the current system — where the subsidy model too often incentivises the pursuit of profit over children's wellbeing — is too dangerous," she said in October.

Ratios right, enforcement wrong: minister

The childcare regulator, ACECQA, is currently reviewing ratios of staff to children in care.

Australia's leading early childhood education professors [have called for lower ratios](#), which they say would make kids safer.

Senator Walsh said ratios themselves were less of a problem than providers not adhering to them.

"What I'm hearing from educators out there is that our ratios themselves are good," she said.



A group of 55 early childhood academics have urged federal, state and territory governments to take six actions to restore public trust in the childcare system. (AAP: Alan Porritt)

"They are world-leading, but what we are hearing is that some providers are not following the ratios at all times, and that is completely unacceptable."

The rapid review of ratios being undertaken by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority is expected to report back to education ministers before the end of the year.

Pay rise a 'game-changer' for sector, says Goodstart CEO

The chief executive of not-for-profit childcare provider Goodstart, Ros Baxter, said she had seen the December 2024 pay rise lead to more workers staying in the industry.

The group has since had a 5 per cent reduction in casuals on the books and a 70 per cent reduction in labour hire.

"This has really been the key decisive factor," Dr Baxter said.

"The thing that has really made a difference to demonstrating to our workforce that they matter, that they are valued, and we've certainly seen that come through in the numbers."



Goodstart Early Learning chief executive Ros Baxter says the pay rise has lowered the company's need for casuals. (ABC News)

The number of educators and carers staying in the sector is up, with vacancy rates dropping by 14 per cent from October 2024 to October 2025, federal government data shows.

Dr Baxter, who oversees the largest provider in the country, said a more stable workforce was key to improving child safety.

"You're able to deliver them the professional development they need to understand how to work appropriately with children," she said.

"It means that children have that same consistent workforce, that same consistent team around them every day, so they are able to feel comfortable with them, they are able to let them know if something's going wrong with them."

The pay bump is tied to a commitment from childcare centres to limit fee increases.

The worker retention payment — which is used to fund the pay increase — will run for two years.

Providers need to apply for the payment, but it is unclear who will pay for the increase once the program ends on November 30, 2026.

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Counselling and support services

- [1800 Respect](#), National counselling helpline: 1800 737 732
- [Bravehearts](#), counselling and support for survivors of child sexual abuse: 1800 272 831
- [Lifeline](#), 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention: 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890 (children and young people)
- [ReachOut](#) at au.reachout.com (children and young people)

[Find support services in your state or territory.](#)