

'It's scary': Childcare abuse cases panic Australian parents

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The childcare industry has grown rapidly in recent years

Twice a week, Ben Bradshaw drops his young son off at a Sydney childcare centre before heading off to work.

Like thousands of parents and carers across Australia, the 40-year-old had always been confident that the staff have his child's best interests at heart.

But in recent months, that trust in the childcare system has been "eroded", the father-of-two says, after several high-profile cases of alleged sexual and physical abuse at centres across Australia.

"It's that old adage of cockroaches - if you see one in your house, there's 10 that you don't see. These are the ones that get caught. It's more scary the ones that you can't see," he tells the BBC.

In the past few weeks, 2,000 children in Victoria have been urged to undergo infectious disease testing after a childcare worker was charged with the mass sexual abuse of babies; police have named a Sydney man who worked for 60 after-school-care providers and is accused of taking "explicit" images of children under his supervision; a Queensland woman has faced court over allegations she tortured a one-year-old boy; and another two workers in Sydney have been charged after a toddler was left covered in bruises.

It comes as the nation is still reeling from the crimes of childcare worker Ashley Paul Griffith - dubbed "one of Australia's worst paedophiles" - who was late last year sentenced to life in prison for raping and sexually abusing almost 70 girls.

The series of allegations have sparked panic and fear among parents, child safety advocates have demanded action to fix what they call a dangerously incompetent system, and politicians have promised reform to keep Australia's most vulnerable safe.

"Some childcare centres are still safe, but the current childcare system is definitely not working to protect children or prioritise their safety," says Hetty Johnston, a leading child protection advocate.

"It fails at every step."

Rapid growth, greater risks

In recent years, there has been a nationwide push to give more children access to early childhood education and care, which research indicates has many positive long-term impacts.

Millions of dollars have been poured into the sector from federal and state governments, including funding to guarantee three days of childcare for low and middle-income families.



Leah Bromfield is among those calling for greater regulation in sector

Such measures have prompted rapid growth in the sector, with a rush of new centres opening which has deepened a shortage of qualified staff.

The growth has led to "significant vulnerabilities", says Prof Leah Bromfield, director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

"Whenever you grow something really quickly, that comes with risks," she says, listing off a lack of regulation and monitoring, limited training for managers, and the disparate and casual nature of the workforce.

"You put all that together and you've created a weak system from the perspective of a predatory perpetrator... a system where it's easier to infiltrate."

In the wake of the Melbourne child sexual abuse case where Joshua Dale Brown was charged with 70 counts of abuse against eight babies, the federal government gave itself greater powers to strip funding from providers that breach quality and safety standards.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare said the measure was not designed to "shut down centres" but rather increase pressure for them to "raise standards".

But Mr Bradshaw wants more. He says taking away funding from a centre "doesn't stop the crime, it just punishes it".

"You have to do things that are proactive in nature."

Creating safe spaces

The spate of alleged crimes have sparked a heated national conversation about how to better protect kids. Limiting the role of men in childcare is one of the most controversial suggestions.

There was a public call to ban men from certain tasks such as changing nappies and taking children to the toilet – though some warned this could place extra pressure on female staff.

"It's not about banning male educators, but about providing families with agency and informed choice," says Louise Edmonds, an advocate for child abuse survivors.

Brown's case prompted G8 Education – who owned the centre where he worked - to introduce so-called "intimate care waivers", giving parents and carers the opportunity to choose who carried out private and sensitive duties. It also pledged to install CCTV at all of its centres.



Joshua Dale Brown faces 70 abuse charges in relation to eight babies

Ms Johnston - who founded child protection group Bravehearts - says these are natural responses, but cautioned that, though "men are definitely a higher risk", women do abuse children too and offenders can do so in all kinds of settings.

"They are opportunistic... when others don't pay attention, when they are distracted, complacent, disinterested or too trusting, they create 'opportunities' for offenders."

Other practical measures centres could adopt to improve child safety include having two educators with direct line of sight of children at all times and getting rid of blind spots in centres - replacing solid doors with glass panes, eliminating windowless walls, and putting more mirrors up to create "incidental supervision".

"It's all about reducing opportunities for predators to isolate or conceal in nooks and crannies," Ms Johnston says.

Hiding in plain sight

But massive system reform is also long overdue, experts say.

In 2017, more than 400 recommendations emerged from a years-long royal commission into child sex abuse in institutional settings – like churches, schools and childcare - but critics say progress has stalled on some of the most significant changes.

One of those outstanding recommendations, to be discussed by the country's attorneys-general at a meeting this month, is to overhaul Australia's checks on those who work with children.

Currently, each state and territory complete what is essentially a police check required for those who work alongside children, but they don't share the information with each other. Advocates have called for a nationalised system, but some say the checks themselves don't go far enough.

"It's inconsistent, relies too heavily on prior convictions," Ms Edmonds says.

For instance, many say, the system should capture red flags such as formal complaints, workplace warnings, police intelligence, and people identified as alleged abusers in confidential applications to the national redress scheme set up after the royal commission.

Casting a broader net is important, experts argue, as child abuse allegations can be difficult to stand up in court. Often the witnesses are young children, who are either non-verbal or have limited vocabulary, may struggle with memory, and often have a lack of situational understanding.

"Catching someone red-handed and being able to prove it beyond reasonable doubt is almost impossible," Ms Johnston says.



Child abuse allegations can be difficult to prove

That's why Prof Bromfield is among those calling for a national registration scheme for the childcare sector – like those that exist for doctors or teachers. It would require workers to prove their qualifications, could provide a detailed work history, and would bind them all by a code of conduct.

Advocates argue the system could also capture many of the things the working-with-children checks currently do not.

"Often in child sexual abuse cases, when you look back, you see lots and lots of red flags," Prof Bromfield says.

"There might be a pattern, but [at the moment] we just don't see that because they are moving between states or between sectors or between providers."

Mr Bradshaw says having access to more information about staff would help parents like him make informed decisions.

Childcare is a necessity for his family, he explains, as he works full-time and his wife, a high school teacher, works four days a week.

But often, there's little detail about the childcare centre's staff "beyond the pictures on the wall" of the teachers and educators, so parents often have to assess a provider "based on vibes".

"It's a bit of a blackbox and you're bound because you need to have your kids in childcare so you can pay for living in a big city."

That's where greater education for parents is needed too, Prof Bromfield says, so they know what questions to ask and, in the worst-case scenarios, how to spot signs of grooming themselves.

Tips include enquiring about a provider's child safety policies, asking about its staff turnover, and assessing the physical spaces for any visibility issues.



Open spaces at childcare centres could help prevent misconduct

There also needs to be better, more regular training for managers in the sector on how to prevent and identify problematic behaviour or patterns, experts say.

For Prof Bromfield - who was part of the team which conducted the royal commission into child sex abuse – these are conversations she has been having for over a decade.

But she is hopeful the current crisis will shock Australia into taking greater action.

"Perhaps one of the things that will happen is there will be greater political will to prioritise safety for children," Prof Bromfield says.

"The big lesson is that we can never rest on our laurels when it comes to children's safety.

"Perpetrators just keep getting smarter, working around the systems we've got. We can't forget the lessons of the past... and we can't assume that this is a problem that's gone away."