

Let's start with a national register of care...

By Paul Mondo

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Let's start with a national register of care workers

Paul Mondo



Nothing is more important when it comes to children than their safety, and when horrifying abuse happens, we must do more to protect our kids.

There is not a childcare lunchroom or team meeting across the country that hasn't been filled with gut-wrenching conversations about the disgraceful and heinous allegations revealed in yesterday's media.

Educators working with children are devastated by the horrifying acts described by police. They want changes that prevent offenders working in our sector.

For years, we've been advocating for stronger child safety measures. Finally, governments are starting to respond.

The most urgent change we need is a national register of Early Childhood Education and Care educators.

This week's shocking revelations confirmed what we've long feared: the accused jumped from centre to centre undetected.

Currently, there is no legal way for ECEC services to validate a person's employment history. And that's not good enough.

A national register would show where an educator has worked, for how long, their qualifications and, critically, whether they have been investigated.

The number of services a person works at can be a red flag, too.

The register is not a matter of convenience, it is necessity for the safety of children and other vulnerable people.

The Australian Childcare Alliance represents 3000 small-to-medium,

predominantly family-run early childhood and education services.

The most meaningful change we can make to improve safety is to shift the culture to put children at the centre of every decision and policy.

The Working with Children Check system is broken and urgently needs to be fixed. WWCCs now operate separately in every state and territory, with no national sharing of information, which means offenders can move across borders without detection.

Worse still, the checks do not show whether individuals have been investigated in other vulnerable sectors, such as aged care or disability.

This is not a new problem. Despite years of advocacy, there has been no real progress in developing a national Working with Children Check system. Or even better, a single, integrated system that protects vulnerable people across education and care settings.

The Queensland government's \$12.7m boost to its early childhood regulator pioneers a commitment to safety, enabling the regulator to do precisely what it should and enhance safety and compliance.

The federal government also announced reforms: stronger protections for using digital devices and policies regarding digital images, mandatory 24-hour reporting of any allegations, complaints, or incidents of physical or sexual abuse, and embedding child safety in National Quality Standards.

These changes are welcome, but not enough.

We all want improvements that better protect children. Governments must investigate what additional child safety and wellbeing measures are needed and we completely support this.

Parents rightly expect their services to undergo regular and consistent

compliance and quality checks, but these checks are not occurring often

enough. More regular compliance visits are needed, with at least one unannounced visit every 12 months.

Surprise visits are crucial for providing regulators visibility into each service's day-to-day practice and to deter poor and unsafe conduct.

Australian childcare services aspire to and often live up to high standards but those that consistently fall short of community, regulatory and family expectations must be held to account.

There is strong support for greater oversight, and we welcome measures that crack down on services that repeatedly are not up to scratch and do not try to get better.

This week has been a dark moment for the sector and one that must lead to extraordinary and meaningful child safety changes.

Hundreds of thousands of educators go to work every day with extraordinary patience, respect and care for children. They should be proud of their contribution to children's safety and development, and we should be proud of them.

Gaps in the system that have allowed alleged predators to work in our sector must be closed. While this is not easy to do, we must get it right.

The first step is to create a national register of who is working with our children.

Paul Mondo is the Australian Childcare Alliance president

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