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Child safety: Union calls for considered response after shocking allegations

The union representing teachers in early childhood education and care is shocked and distressed by revelations of abuse and mistreatment of young children in the sector.

“The allegations emerging from Victoria this week, together with the abuse and mistreatment of children uncovered by Four Corners in March leading to a NSW Upper House Inquiry, are deeply disturbing and require strong action,” said Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews.

“For more than 50 years, union members have pushed for better pay, conditions and training to ensure higher standards of early childhood education and a strong culture of child safety.”

The union is actively engaged with the National Child Safety Review as well as the NSW Upper House Inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector. We have also consulted with the NSW regulatory authority for early childhood education and care.

Careful solutions – not quick fixes

“While child safety must be paramount, now is not the time to rush out quick solutions that fail to address the complex underlying issues in this sector,” Matthews said.

Regular, specialist training in child protection should be mandatory for all staff, volunteers, nominated supervisors and authorised providers. Current laws require only one member of staff to have undertaken training.

“CCTV is not a magic bullet – for example, it cannot be installed in baby-change rooms and bathrooms. It is no substitute for a strong child safety culture,” Matthews said.

All employees should be required to hold a valid working with children check (not just to have applied for one). “But this system is not failsafe, in that it only picks up criminal records or serious reportable conduct allegations,” Matthews said. “Better information sharing protocols are needed to close gaps.”

Deal with staff shortages

The union has long raised the alarm about chronic staffing shortages in the sector caused by poor pay and conditions. The IEU calls for action to:

- Address the acute staffing shortage by raising wages and providing professional development leading to better recruitment and retention.
- Pay teachers in the early childhood sector the same as their counterparts in schools.
- Improve staffing ratios to ensure proper levels of supervision.
- Create safer systems for staff to report concerns quickly without fear of repercussions.
- Lift the quality of training by getting rid of shonky training organisations issuing substandard qualifications.
- Boost federal government funding for not-for-profit (NFP) and community-based services.

Profit model flawed

Research shows that centres run by NFP providers consistently achieve a higher rating under the National Quality Standards than for-profit services.

NFPs invest more in wages and conditions leading to a more stable, qualified and committed workforce, which is crucial to child safety.

“The business model of for-profit providers needs reform – the focus on profits rather than high-quality education and care is a big reason behind safety breaches,” Matthews said.

“Regardless of the business model, all staff should receive regular, specialised professional development in both child safety and caring for children who have high learning support and/or behavioural needs.”

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The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

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