

# Australia: Allegations of abuse in childcare centres expose deep systemic crisis

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On July 1, Victoria Police, in Australia's second most populous state, publicly revealed that a 26-year-old childcare worker, Joshua Dale Brown, had been charged with over 70 offences related to the alleged sexual abuse of eight children.

The charges include sexual penetration of a child, producing child abuse material and recklessly contaminating goods to cause alarm or anxiety. The crimes are alleged to have occurred between April 2022 and January 2023 while Brown was employed at a childcare centre in Point Cook, a working-class suburb in Melbourne's west. The children involved were between five months and two years old.

Brown had been under police investigation well before the public announcement. He was arrested on May 12—more than 50 days earlier—but a suppression order prevented any media coverage until July.

The state government created a dedicated web page listing all 20 centres where Brown had worked across Melbourne and Geelong from 2017 to 2025. The Department of Health texted 2,600 families, and 1,200 children were recommended for testing for sexually transmitted infections.

The revelations have produced horror and panic not only for families with children in childcare facilities in Victoria but throughout the country. No explanations have been offered to the affected families as to how, over a ten-month period, the conditions existed for such alleged abuses to be carried out.

Brown, who has worked in childcare for eight years, had a current "Working with Children" police permit. It has since been revealed that two official complaints against Brown were substantiated, one for aggressively handling a child, but he continued to work in the sector.

According to accounts published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), parents feel they "have been left feeling confused by communications from authorities and abandoned by centre operators."

On July 2, Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan declared that all Victorians were "horrified" by the "sickening allegations" and announced a state review into child safety in childcare centres. Minister for Children Lizzie Blandthorn attempted to deflect blame onto the federal government, citing delays in national reforms and pointing to the federal withdrawal of funding for state regulators in 2018.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare, appearing on ABC's "7.30 Report," stated that he and other ministers had been aware of sexual misconduct cases in childcare but had failed to act with urgency. He now claims to be committed to immediate reform—a claim belied by years of bipartisan neglect.

Brown's alleged offending would constitute criminal and anti-social behaviour of a pathological character. But the conditions where it could occur, without detection for an extended period of time, are clear.

The privatisation of childcare, an industry that has experienced burgeoning growth over the past decade, means profit, not childcare, is primary. Families are compelled to place their babies and children into childcare because women must return to work earlier and earlier in a child's life, as families cannot survive on one wage.

According to Georgie Dent, CEO of The Parenthood, between 2013 and 2023, the number of early childhood education and care (ECEC) places available to Australian children increased by 50 percent; at long daycare centres, places increased 69 percent. In 2023, nearly half of one-year-olds and 90 percent of four-year-olds attended some form of ECEC, and currently, more than one million Australian households use childcare.

Successive federal and state governments—Labor and Liberal alike—have overseen the creation of a childcare system driven by market share prices and profits. They have flooded the private sector with public funds with minimal oversight. Reviews and inquiries have served as cover for inaction, shielding the exploitative nature of the industry.

The workforce, predominantly young women, receives virtually minimum wages.

The federal Keating Labor government accelerated the privatisation of childcare in the 1990s, abolishing restrictions on "not-for-profit" operators and opening the floodgates to corporate investment. Since the early 2000s, large for-profit childcare chains have been listed on the stock exchange. Today, 75 percent of long day care centres are run for profit—among the highest rates of childcare privatisation globally. Each year, between 300 and 400 new centres open, with 95 percent in the for-profit sector.

The largest of these, G8 Education, one of the companies

where Brown worked and allegedly conducted his abuse, posted a net profit of \$68 million last year. By 2025, government subsidies to the sector are projected to reach \$15 billion, with \$3.4 billion disbursed in the March 2024 quarter alone. The ASX-listed company has been hammered following the allegations—its share price shrinking 13 percent in five days.

As Professor Gabrielle Meagher of Macquarie University told ABC-TV's "Four Corners" on March 17 this year, "Real estate brokers, property developers, investment bankers are looking to make big money in the childcare sector... The system is underpinned by a secure and growing stream of government funding."

Private equity firms are major players, acquiring centres, slashing costs, boosting "occupancy" and flipping them for profit. A former manager, Letiha Loveday, reported being pressured to understaff centres, receiving financial incentives to meet wage, occupancy and profit targets. "I would have to do four or five jobs at once," she said, "like cooking while supervising children."

The consequences are dire. In 2024 alone, 26,000 incidents were reported in Australian child care centres—a 27 percent increase in three years. At least seven children a day are going missing, are not accounted for or are locked out of childcare centres—a 49 percent rise over the same period. Over 3,000 toddlers and babies are hospitalised annually due to injuries sustained in care.

State-based regulatory systems have proven toothless. In New South Wales, private operator Affinity racked up 1,700 breaches in four years, including children suffering bone fractures. It received a fine of just \$2,000. The company continues to expand.

According to the *Guardian*, the Productivity Commission revealed: "...for-profit providers spent less of their total costs on labour (63 percent of their overall costs, compared with 77 percent for the not-for-profit sector), paid staff less (64.3 percent of staff were paid above award wage, compared with 94.5 percent of staff at not-for-profits) and fewer of their staff were employed full-time than at not-for profit centres (25 percent compared with 47 percent).

"As a result, the Productivity Commission found lower staff turnover (27 percent compared with 41 percent) and lower staff vacancies (9.7 percent compared with 22 percent) at not-for-profit centres." This results in rampant casualisation of staff, with 50 percent of staff having been in the sector for less than three years.

It is a workforce in crisis. Childcare workers are among the lowest paid in the country. A recent 15 percent pay rise—granted over two years—has barely dented decades of wage stagnation. There are currently 21,000 staff vacancies in the sector, driven by poverty wages, crushing workloads and rampant casualisation.

In 2020, G8 Education admitted to underpaying 27,000 workers by \$80 million. Five years later, the matter remains

under investigation. Another collapsed provider, Genius, operated for years while withholding wages and superannuation. "You can't get high-quality staff when you don't pay your educators," a former employee told the ABC.

On July 9, the United Workers Union (UWU) released the results of its Early Childhood Education and Care Quality and Safety Census, based on responses from 2,100 educators. Conducted before the Brown allegations, the survey revealed that 77 percent of centres operate below minimum staffing levels at least weekly—42 percent do so daily. One educator stated: "I can't even guarantee the safety of the children or myself. I feel sick, unsafe, and stressed every day."

These conditions—chronic understaffing, low wages, unregulated profiteering and the hiring of underqualified or unvetted staff—are incompatible with any guarantee of safety and quality care.

The unions, including the UWU, have played a complicit role. Rather than fighting for wages, safety and staffing, they have focused on securing their role as enforcers of enterprise bargaining, imposing ever-worsening conditions.

Today's cost-of-living crisis has forced working-class families into impossible choices. With both parents needing to work to survive, families must rely on a childcare system they cannot trust—one that extracts exorbitant fees despite massive public subsidies.

Childcare should not be a luxury or a business opportunity. It is a fundamental social right. Under capitalism, however, it has been transformed into a marketplace of exploitation—where the youngest and most vulnerable are sacrificed for profit.

When a society permits such systemic abuse and neglect of those who cannot speak for themselves—its infants and toddlers—it indicts itself. The entire political and capitalist economic order stands exposed.



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