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ACT Early Childhood Education and Care Centre

c/- CECA@act.gov.au

17th February 2021

To Whom It May Concern;

RE: YWCA Conder Child Care Centre

As a parent of a child attending the abovementioned centre, I wish to bring to your attention concerns I have regarding the compliance of the centre and parent organisation with the National Quality Standards.

We first raised our concerns to the organization in May 2020 regarding a change in communication with parents that was undertaken without consultation. After raising the matter, the organization conducted a "survey"; it was a poorly executed survey and deliberately led to responses the organization was seeking. When I raised this concern to the organization's Chief Executive Officer, Ms. P01, she told me to complete the survey and provide the feedback there. I did as instructed and promptly received a threatening letter from Ms. P01 informing me that I was no longer permitted to engage with the organization except to discuss matters directly concerning my child and then I was only permitted to contact the centre directly.

Understandably, this experience left me frightened to speak up and I have sat back and watched the organization, and now the centre itself, deteriorate to the point where I no longer believe the service is safe.

Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice

As parents, we rarely receive updates as to what our child is learning. The daily program is posted on OWNA however we do not receive reports as to learnings or outcomes and there is rarely photographs or other evidence of product. We used to receive daily updates through OWNA with photos and sometimes, learning stories. We very occasionally receive learning stories now about our child. The end of year report contained very basic information about our child and we did not receive a folder of artwork or other such material that we did the previous year. As parents, it's very sad to not have keepsakes or evidence of what our child is engaged with daily.

Quality Area 2 – Children's health and safety

The information we receive regarding our child's food intake, sleep and nappy changes is sporadic. There has been a marked improvement this week as a result of lodging a complaint last week after finding my daughter in a terrible state on collection.

On Wednesday 10th February 2021, I arrived to collect my daughter and I could tell from the carpark that her nappy was overfull as it was sagging down to her knees and she was struggling pulling it up whilst she was walking. I entered the centre and as I was signing her out of the kiosk, I heard her scream and then cry. When I looked out, I could see she was on the ground. An educator was attending her so I moved in through the rooms to the playground. By then, the educator had left her and she was walking up the path with her friends. When she saw me, she started crying and showed me her elbow; it was bleeding from fresh scrapes as was her knee.

I picked her up and walked over to the senior educator and informed him what had occurred. He said nothing; he just looked at me. I was upset and having the letter from the CEO previously ringing through my mind, I left, in tears along with my daughter.

Upon arrival home, I removed my daughter's nappy; it was absolutely soaking and leaked through her clothes and mine from where I had picked her up. Her perineal region was caked in sand and bark chips and there was a dried ball of faeces in the nappy. Between the nappy and the scrapes, the only thing I could do at that point was bath her to try and clean her up. She was so distressed and cried for at least 30 minutes after getting home, being bathed and dressed; all I could do was sit and cuddle her during that distress.

I have taken photographs of her condition on that day. I hate looking at them. My husband sent the letter informing the centre director of what had occurred as I was too scared to. However, as parents we decided that we had to speak up for our daughter. The email was not acknowledged from Thursday 11th February through until Tuesday 16th February when the centre director verbally informed me she had received it.

This is the first time this has happened at this centre that we are aware of; and we are devastated. We knew the standards were dropping rapidly but we never thought things would get so bad that our daughter would suffer like that. The "perfect storm" happened that day; the two educators we know and trust and have always looked after the children well, were not there that day.

Quality Area 3 – Physical environment

The playground has been altered considerably since the departure of the original centre director in June 2020 (“original” for us as she was the person in the role when we started our daughter at the Conder centre). Equipment has been removed and not replaced.

There is a heavy reliance on “bring your bike to school” day; we’ve stopped participating after a series of incidents whereby our daughter’s belongings were broken. The most recent breakage was perplexing to say the least; the front wheel of her scooter had come off. There was no damage to the wheel otherwise and the bolts were unable to be located. No one could tell us how it happened. Considering the scooter was not that old, and only ever ridden outside at day care, it was interesting that it came home in that condition.

One of the reasons we chose the YWCA at Conder was because the playground was active and engaging. Our child is very outgoing and loves climbing and swinging and being active outdoors. All of that equipment is now gone, without consultation or explanation.

Quality Area 4 – Staffing arrangements

Quite honestly where do we even start on this? Since the original director left last year, then her replacement left within two months, there has been an exodus of educators from the centre. It has been so sad and worrying to watch genuinely caring and lovely people leave. It has been frightening to not know the names or faces of the new staff replacements and finding yourself dropping off to or picking up your child from strangers.

We only get a day or two’s notice of an educator leaving, usually from them rather than the centre director. We get no information on the arrangements for replacing them and no introductions when a new educator commences; even from the educator themselves. I have walked into the toddler room one afternoon to find my daughter alone with a male educator whose name I didn’t know. The new centre director was sitting in her office. I had to introduce myself to them; they still did not even offer their names. I only found out last week that the current director prefers to be called P01 after she answered the phone to me.

Ms. P01 P01, Senior Early Childhood Services Manager, sent a letter via the centre director to parents on 9 February 2021 after yet another staff member resigned. As with previous communication from Ms. P01, the truthfulness of it is questionable based on conversations with the staff themselves. This letter was only sent after parents started publicly requesting YWCA attend to the staffing issues at the centre through the OWNA app.

Parents are unhappy. Staff are desperately unhappy. Staff have also confided in me that they are too scared to speak out within the organization; noting the problems are stemming from higher in the organization than the centre director. They are leaving because of a toxic culture. If my experience last year is anything to go by, the educators are right to be scared to speak out or challenge the misleading behaviours and information coming from higher up.

Quality Area 5 – Relationships with children

I cannot fault the educators who have been with us on our journey with Conder since we joined. Our daughter absolutely adores her two main educators and still has a tight attachment to the educator she had in the nursery room. The other educators have now all gone which is so incredibly sad.

However, she is not building relationships with the new staff and has stated to me she doesn't like one of them. This is highly unusual for our daughter who generally gets along well with people and adapts well to new situations once she warms up. I believe this reflects the current staffing concerns mentioned in Quality Area 4.

Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

Quite simply, I don't believe there are partnerships from the organization or the centre director. I believe the two lead educators in our daughter's room embody this standard because they genuinely care for and about the children. However, the organization made it clear their opinion of engagement with families with the manner in which they handled removing the OWNA app last year and things have devolved rapidly since then.

We do not get most information about our child's day. The staff are busy with so many bits of paper and books which are kept in a location that most parents cannot access and do not have time to access at time of pick up. The app is updated haphazardly despite being assured last year that all information would be uploaded at the end of the day. That rarely happens. I don't blame the educators for this; this sits solely with the organization's decision to not pay for an app that parent's overwhelming voted as their preferred method of communication and by not having a replacement system in place to ensure the flow of information to parents was maintained.

I have correspondence from the OWNA app organization stating that the YWCA did not want to pay an ongoing subscription to it. That is different information to that provided by the YWCA to us parents. We were given three or four different reasons as to why the organization made the decision they did; when challenged, they became defensive. When provided evidence of their untruthfulness; they sent me a letter to stop me speaking out. I complied for fear of having my daughter "kicked out" of the centre she loved attending with educators and staff we trusted and were happy with. That does not indicate partnerships with families.

Additionally, whilst understanding that each organization takes its own approach to managing the risks of COVID-19, it was disheartening to not have an end-of-year celebration with all families invited as did occur at many other child care centres in the ACT. It was also disheartening that no effort was made last year regarding school photos. Little things add up; the centre is now a transactional service. We drop our child off, hold our breath and hope for the best, prior to picking her up at the end of the day.

Quality Area 7 – Governance and leadership

I think you can probably ascertain my perspective on this area; the organization has serious problems stemming from higher than the centre itself. Having interacted with Ms. P01, Ms. P01, Ms. P01 and each Centre Director, it is evident that there are issues within the organization and it is now affecting the day-to-day outcomes for the children in the centre. Staff are frightened to speak out; if provided a safe environment I'm sure they would confirm information they have provided to us parents. Contact current and previous staff and I'm sure they will have many an interesting story to tell CECA.

Yesterday, the centre director P01, demonstrating a complete lack of insight in my opinion, has chosen to raise the subject of moving our daughter out of the toddler room into the preschool room because her third birthday is next week. This is in the same conversation where she acknowledged she had received our email regarding the incident last week and the leader of the preschool room was the educator to whom I reported my concerns on the day and he said nothing.

I responded by saying I preferred my daughter to remain in her current room with her current educators. P01 told me it would impact on my daughter's "development". When I picked my daughter up yesterday afternoon, P01 again asked me to "consider moving her because a lot of the children are going into that room and that might upset [my daughter]". Two attempts in one day to guilt me into adding to the changes in my daughter's life in that centre and moving her from the two educators she is settled and happy with to an educator she has openly stated she doesn't like and whom neither of her parents trust courtesy of their own separate interactions with him.

As a parent, I have been frightened to speak out and challenge the stories we are getting told. Aside from common sense, and the information provided from the staff themselves, we can see with our own eyes the negative changes occurring at the Conder Centre. I spend my days standing up for the vulnerable; I'm able to generally see both sides of a story and I try to be reasonable and conciliatory. It's an old-fashioned principle of "treat others how I would like to be treated".

However, I have been sitting on my hands on this matter trying not to be "that" parent and serial complainant, second guessing my own conduct and motivation, and questioning "is it just me?". I have been hoping things will improve or some other parent will stand up first. My daughter has now been injured and I won't stay silent on it a moment longer.

I quite firmly do not wish to be named to the organization. From my previous experience with them I do not feel safe. We are currently looking at options for removing our daughter and placing her elsewhere; we were trying to hold out until we move to Queensland later this year but if we are forced to move her into another room anyway and now we've had an incident with harm, we will move her sooner. That however does not negate the harm currently occurring that needs an external lens put on it please.

Yours sincerely,

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